

CIVIC ENGAGEMENT: FOUNDATION OF DEMOCRACY

Empowering Individuals and Communities Through Civic Engagement

What is civic engagement and citizenship and why is it important for AmeriCorps members to increase civic engagement competencies? Aren't members civically engaged by virtue of their commitment to service?

Defining Active Citizenship

To begin, there are many ideas and definitions of civic engagement. Most definitions include, in some form, at least three key components. Consider this definition from The State of Service-Related Research. The Grantmaker Forum on Community and National Service

Citizenship or civic participation consists of **behaviors, attitudes, and actions** that reflect concerned and active membership in a community. This includes the more traditional electoral citizenship activities, such as **voting, serving** on nonprofit boards or school boards, as well as less traditional forms of political participation, such as **community organizing** and **social activism**. It includes participation in small neighborhood-based efforts and the larger national and international movements.

Behaviors, attitudes and actions. These are the common principles of citizenship and civic engagement. Voting, serving, organizing and social activism are all expressions of active citizenship. And, while many individuals associate citizenship primarily, or solely, with voting, active citizenship clearly encompasses a broader range of involvement.

Active citizenship is about personal and community empowerment. Voting is a part of that package of empowerment, but only one part. Service is a part as well, but only a part. For individuals and communities to access legitimate power to promote and protect their interests and rights, they must also be able to serve, organize and to take action. By accessing as many sources of civic empowerment available, individuals and communities can impact their own lives, and the lives of others, in a significant way.

Voting alone is usually not sufficient. Service, by itself, is also often inadequate. Or organizing. Or even social action. But together they components of civic engagement can be very effective in not only addressing needs but also affecting change.

Well-trained AmeriCorps members can be significant influences and resources in helping facilitate an expanded awareness of active citizenship and civic engagement.

Roots of Active Citizenship

Active citizenship has a strong tradition in this country dating back to its earliest days. In fact, the principles of active citizenship are embedded in this country's founding document, the Declaration of Independence. This document outlines the fundamental rights extended to all individuals. The presence or absence of these rights is often referred to as social justice. To better understand the concept of active citizenship as expressed

through civic engagement, look briefly at the founding document that holds both a promise and a mandate.

A Promise and a Mandate

Declaration of Independence:

We hold these truths to be self-evident,
that all men are created equal,
that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights,
that among these are Life,
Liberty and
the pursuit of Happiness.

A Promise

“We hold these truths to be self-evident” are the opening words to one of the most powerful and radical paragraphs ever written. It holds a promise and, although it is often overlooked, it contains a mandate. The Declaration of Independence is our nation’s founding document. It set the framework and established the fundamental values for the new country. Because, on the simplest level, American Democracy is about the presence or absence of these values, it is worth taking a moment to review these words and what they mean.

We hold these truths to be self evident

The writers not only stated that they believed the words that would follow were the truth, they should also be obvious or self evident to any rational person hearing them.

That all men are created equal

History is clear that when these words were written, this equality did not actually extend to “all” men in the new country (for example African American slaves or Native Americans). Neither did this concept extend to women. However, in the historical context, the notion that the common man had the same rights as the wealthy nobility is remarkably radical. This statement of equality set the stage for future generations to examine this idea and to expand their own understanding regarding this notion of all being equal. As a result, succeeding generations have reexamined and redefined the concept of equality and the Constitution of the United States was amended in Articles 15 and 19, extending voting rights to all without regard to race or sex. In 1971 the right to vote extended further to all youth 18 years old to have an equal voice in the electoral process. Sometimes, from our current perspective, we lose sight of the fact that in the 1700s, the notion of equality of any kind for the common man, especially on such a scale, was a radical and dangerous notion, particularly to the established English nobility and European social orders. While the motives and actions of the Founding Fathers have been closely scrutinized and often criticized, the more critical and relevant question for us to ask today is. “What do you believe?” Do you believe that all people are born equal at least with regards to a certain set of universal rights? That is the important question. Our perspective today with regards to these statements is much more important than debating the perspective and intent of the authors over 200 years ago.

That they are endowed by their Creator

Where do these rights come from? It is important to recognize that these rights originate from a higher power and are not subject to the whims of any individual, group, government, or king. This was not intended as a statement of religious faith as much as it was an appeal to a supreme origin of the following rights. This practice of appealing to a higher authority is common with many groups, both secular and religious. Take, for example, the Preamble to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which reads: “This Universal Bill of Rights is promulgated under the authority of the Universal Supreme Law; the Law of God; the Law of Nature; the Law of the Constitution; and the Law of Common Sense.” The Humanist Manifesto III (2003) contains the phrase, “We are committed to treating each person as having inherent worth and dignity...”

It is this “inherent worth” that is central to this phrase. For those who operate from a general Judeo-Christian perspective (as many, but certainly not all, of the Founding Fathers did) this “inherent value” originates from the Creator.

For those who do not subscribe to that perspective that value originates from a “Supreme Law.” In any case, the source of human rights is not found in governments or human institutions. The government’s responsibility is to protect those rights.

With certain unalienable rights

Because these rights are not granted by government, government cannot deny these rights to individuals or groups and these rights are not to be restricted, removed or taken away, except under certain extreme circumstances.

That among these are

The rights that follow are the basic, fundamental rights guaranteed to every person.

Because these rights are universal, they are not just reserved for citizens.

In fact, when this document was signed, there were no citizens of the United States, because there was no United States of America.

Life

This means that everyone has a right to the basic needs for sustaining life. They have a right to adequate food and shelter. They have a right to participate in activities that sustain life. This right also includes the right to be safe, physically and emotionally, and also to earn a living.

Liberty

This is the freedom and the ability to choose what to think, what to believe, what to say, where to live, and what to do with your life.

And the pursuit of Happiness

The Founding Fathers believed that all people have the right to pursue those things that bring them personal peace and joy. It is remarkable concepts as Life and Liberty. And yet, happiness is a central right guaranteed by this Declaration. Our country was founded on “these truths,” promises made by the embryonic United States to its people. Every

generation has a right to expect that these rights will be protected. But, every generation also has a responsibility to ensure that these rights are not only protected, but also realized by the “all” that are now presumed “equal.” Moreover, whenever these rights to life, liberty, and happiness are threatened or denied, our Declaration of Independence serves as a mandate to action for every person who calls this country “home.”

This, essentially, is social justice through civic engagement: ensuring that the rights guaranteed to every person in our historical documents are protected and realized by “all,” because, as the Founding Fathers so eloquently expressed, in this country “all” are to be equal in their right to life, to liberty, and even to the pursuit of happiness. But social justice oriented civic engagement often takes this a step further, recognizing that “equal rights” is not the same as “equal access.” Civic engagement can address both of these important areas.

A Mandate

Many of you might be saying (or screaming), “There is no way that ‘all’ are ‘equal’ in this country.” And you would be right. There are many people in our country and in our world who are not treated as equals and who do not have access to even the basics of life, much less liberty and happiness. That is why active citizenship and social justice is so important. Active citizenship works to make the words of the Declaration of Independence more of a reality in individuals’ lives and in all types of communities throughout this country. To deny any individual or group any of these basic rights is to disrespect the Declaration of Independence. To ignore injustice is to ignore the very principles our country was founded on. Active Citizenship and Social justice is at the heart of our democracy. It can be expressed through our freedom of speech, our freedom to question, our freedom to protest, especially our freedom to act and our freedom to serve. It can be expressed through the combined power of our votes but must be expressed in ways that extend well beyond the voting booth.

Regardless of how it is expressed, social justice through active citizenship and is one of the most fundamental mandates we have in our country. Without it, we cease to be Americans, at least as the Founding Fathers envisioned this new social experiment that was so presumptuous as to declare that “all men are created equal” and that all are “endowed with certain unalienable rights” which include not only the basics of “Life” and the fundamentals of “Liberty,” but extends even to the guarantee of the “pursuit of happiness.”